

# Inside Culture

Re-imagining the Method of Cultural Studies

Nick Couldry



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*To Louise*

## Acknowledgements

This is a short book that deals with a very large subject. In writing about the methodological issues which underlie cultural studies' practice today, I will have to be selective and will inevitably omit some significant debates. In one sense, then, I should begin with an apology, but in another sense it was precisely a brief, manageable, personal view of a topic for too long left uncharted, or worse obscured, that I found I needed for myself, and therefore hoped that others might also find useful.

My main aim has been to make cultural studies' vast literature of theoretical debate more approachable, but without disguising either the difficulty of the issues, or my personal conviction that it is in the direction of rigorous, wide-ranging empirical research that the future of cultural studies must lie. I have become impatient with cultural studies' writing that uses overelaborate language to evade seemingly simple questions about the empirical accountability of its claims; but I am still less satisfied with 'common sense' attacks on cultural studies' theoretical tradition that dismiss it as a long 'detour' from the supposedly secure terrain of social science. Ironically, it is often cultural studies that has led the way, and traditional social science that has followed, in taking on board important theoretical concerns about the status of researching the cultures and societies in which we live.

Now, however, when its potential as an international, multicentred discipline becomes clear, cultural studies needs some common ground of methodological debate, which can be shared between its practitioners across the world. This book, I hope, is a contribution to establishing that common ground.

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Nick Couldry

London, September 1999

# 1 Introduction

Forty years ago, Raymond Williams (1961: 10) wrote that there was no academic subject which allowed him to ask the questions in which he was interested: questions concerning how culture and society, democracy and the individual voice, interrelate. It is cultural studies, we normally assume, that has filled this gap; however, when we look for a consensus about what cultural studies actually involves, we find high levels of uncertainty.

As cultural studies enters a new century, now is a good time to reflect on the space cultural studies occupies and ask in what direction it should be going. I want to map that space, but without the bitterness that has characterized much recent debate.<sup>1</sup> The map is, of course, a personal one; in the contested space of culture, how could it be otherwise?

I shall highlight questions of method. I mean here ‘method’ in the broadest sense: what types of things should cultural studies be doing? What problems does it face? Those questions necessarily take us through other questions, which we might call ‘personal’: what is the individual’s place within cultural formations? How are those formations involved in forming my voice? The latter questions are not merely for closed introspection: they have a public significance for the cultural life we share. We are forced also to confront issues of pedagogy: what exactly is it that we hope to teach, or study, in cultural studies? All these questions can be brought together in a single underlying methodological question: what is the space from which cultural studies speaks?

My answer, in essence, is that cultural studies is an expanding space for sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research into the massive, power-laden complexity of contemporary culture.

## Images and principles

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To begin with, some images by which to orientate ourselves. First, we can picture cultural studies as the distinctive approach to culture that results when we stop thinking about culture as particular valued texts and think about it as a broader process in which each person has an equal right to be heard, and each person's voice and reflections about culture are valuable. Cultural studies represents that space of equality. That is what Raymond Williams (1961: 321) meant by overcoming the 'long dominative mode' of thinking about culture. This principle is still radical and important today.

We have only to state it, however, to see that culture, as it operates, recognizes those rights of equality very imperfectly. Actual culture involves the concentration, not the dispersal of voices; being represented by others, not speaking directly in our own voice; the commodification of speech and image, not complete openness. That is a basic consequence of the irreversible link between cultural life and the capitalist economy. 'Culture', then, is already a paradoxical term and that paradox is something each of us as an individual may feel. Stuart Hall, while discussing the notion of 'black popular culture', has expressed this well:

popular culture . . . is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience. It is an area that is profoundly mythic . . . It is there that we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented. Not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time. (S. Hall, 1992a: 22)

This means recognizing the complex and contested nature of culture. As a result, cultural studies thinks of culture in relation to issues of power: the power relations (whether driven by economics, politics or other forms of social discrimination) which affect who is represented and how, who speaks and who is silent, what counts as 'culture' and what does not. The necessary link between studying culture and theorizing *power* is one thing on which most cultural studies writers agree,<sup>2</sup> and it is treated here as fundamental to defining cultural studies as a distinctive area of study.

It is precisely here, however – in thinking about cultural studies as a democratic vision of culture, committed to investigating the links between culture and power – that the self-critique of cultural studies must begin. Applying this vision rigorously, I argue, means revising radically some of our standard assumptions about what 'culture' we study and what researching culture involves.

Cultural studies began with a democratic critique of earlier elitist

approaches to culture, recognizing the fundamental importance of 'popular culture': the experiences and pleasures of those outside the cultural elites. This step was absolutely essential in expanding the range of cultural production deemed worthy of academic study. Now, however, our priorities must be formulated in different terms.

There has always been a problem of how cultural studies' academic voice relates to popular culture: academic writing is, by definition, not part of popular culture but analyses it from outside. As Dick Hebdige put it insightfully at the end of his classic study *Subculture*: 'We [the academic analysts] are cast in a marginal role. We are in society but not inside it, producing analyses of popular culture which are themselves anything but popular' (Hebdige, 1979: 139–40). Others have made a similar point (de Certeau, 1984: 41; Chambers, 1986: 216; cf., generally, Ross, 1989). In addition, many have doubted whether something called the 'popular' can be identified which is always subordinated to, or dominated by, another part of culture – 'high' culture. What if this is wrong and it is now popular culture which is dominant?<sup>3</sup> Or, more cautiously, what if the status-map of culture is changing radically, through the overwhelming influence of centralized, popular media such as television? Can cultural studies' relationship to what we call 'popular culture' be unchanged by this?<sup>4</sup>

The problem with the term 'popular culture' is symptomatic of a wider difficulty. If we take seriously the principle that culture is a process in which each person's experience is significant, then surely any limitation on what aspect or 'level' of culture we study – including any bias against or towards the 'popular', the 'marginal', the 'deviant' – is problematic. If we accept this, we must start thinking about culture differently, and radically expand the aspects of culture we study. This means facing up to the exclusions which cultural studies itself has entrenched over the past thirty years. To list a few: the ignoring of the cultural experience of the old; the downplaying of the 'middlebrow' or of any cultural experience which is not 'spectacular' or 'resistant'; the lack of attention to the cultural experience of elites (we cannot assume that the boundaries of elites are unchanging); the limited research (within cultural studies at least) on the cultures of work, business and science; and so on?<sup>5</sup> Indeed if, as Hall points out, popular culture is *not* simply 'what we experience', then we have to study the much larger space suggested by this 'not': the shadows which popular culture casts, as well as the light it projects. This general principle – of opening up much more the range of cultural experience which cultural studies investigates – runs throughout the book.

My original image of cultural studies has a further methodological consequence. If we take seriously the contribution that everyone makes to cultural life, then we have to be sceptical about all attempts to reify culture, that is,

to see it as a unified 'object' rather than a mass of open-ended processes. This applies not only to the 'popular'/'high' culture distinction, but also to ideas of national cultures, ethnic cultures, even the idea that an individual's identity can be easily read off from certain cultural or social coordinates. Cultural studies, therefore, should take seriously the full complexity of being 'inside' culture.

This – to anticipate a little – is where method comes in. We should always reject short cuts in cultural description, not because we want complexity for its own sake, but because this is the only way to think culture in a non-dominative way, to recognize it as a space of multiple voices and forces. We need a theory of cultural complexity, but without lapsing into excessively complex language (a fault of some recent cultural studies). We need the tools to think about, and research, cultural complexity in a manageable way.

If we can imagine cultural studies as a democratic space of cultural exchange, we can also imagine it another way. In a cultural situation where we are continually represented within – and assumed to belong to – a cultural 'present', we surely need another space, a space where we reserve the right to refuse those forms of address, or at least question them. We need a space where we can ask: How did those forms of address come to be directed at us, at me? Who, or what, is this 'me' formed by those types of address? Social forces may have helped form our individual voices, but that does not mean our position as individuals within wider cultural formations is unproblematical. This space of questioning and reflexivity is another way of imagining the space of cultural studies itself. Our descriptions and theories of cultural complexity must be brought back to bear upon the individual's experience of culture: the difficult, uncertain questions of belonging and detachment.

In addressing the central issue of cultural studies – the links between culture and power – I shall emphasize these three principles: *openness*, *complexity* and *reflexivity*.<sup>6</sup> Taken together, they have generated the argument of this book. Chapter 3 looks at the complexities which individual experience generates for broader claims about culture. Chapter 6 then explores in more detail what it means to bring into the work of cultural studies our own voices (whether as researchers, as teachers, or as students) while at the same time maintaining a grasp of the wider forces which shape individual selves. Together, Chapters 3 and 6 explore the significance of reflexivity for the method of cultural studies. Chapters 4 and 5, by contrast, reflect on the complexity of cultural experience from a more general, trans-individual perspective. They look, respectively, at how we should think about texts and about cultural formations. Underlying all these discussions are certain values of cultural democracy which are central to cultural studies; these are developed explicitly in Chapter 2. Chapter 7 connects those

values and the book's overall argument with recent thinking about democracy and community.

Taken as a whole, the book brings together two aspects of studying culture which are often kept apart: the 'objective' and the 'subjective' – the scale of social and cultural production, and the scale of individual sense-making and reflection. Yet they are, I argue, two aspects of the same picture: how we speak about others and how we speak personally must be consistent with each other, if our theory is to be fully accountable (see especially Chapter 6). We cannot oversimplify the cultural experiences of others, without caricaturing our own.<sup>7</sup> Cultural studies in this sense involves an ethic of reciprocity, a mutual practice of both speaking and listening, which is inextricably tied to taking seriously the complexity of cultures. It is here that ethics (and politics) converge with method; for it is method that provides the basic tools with which we can empirically research that complexity in a systematic and accountable way. This is the central argument of the book.

## Cultural studies as a discipline?

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One measure of the success of cultural studies' central vision has been the wide popularity of the term 'cultural studies'. It has come to be applied to almost any form of theoretically influenced textual study, from literary analysis to art history. I adopt, however, a narrower usage. If we stand by the central vision of cultural studies as the study of culture which addresses its connections with power, then by 'cultural studies' I shall refer only to those areas of research which genuinely have the methodological tools to analyse those connections systematically. Although such tools will include some from literary analysis (inevitably, given cultural studies' ancestry in literary studies), the principal methodological focus is the *sociologically influenced, and fully materialist*, analysis of 'culture', usually traced back to British cultural studies of the late 1950s (especially the work of Raymond Williams). This is an indication of the methodological region in which I see cultural studies as operating; the rest of the book, I hope, justifies this position. I am definitely not claiming that cultural studies 'originated' in Britain, let alone that in such an 'origin' lies its destiny.

Looking in the opposite direction, cultural studies' concern with power and its insistence on certain democratic values at the heart of its method distinguish it sharply from the approaches to culture in traditional social science, or what is formally called 'cultural sociology', which explicitly reject such a 'power-based framework of analysis' (P. Smith, 1998b: 7). Having said that, in recent years the sociology of culture has made various attempts



to 'catch up' with cultural studies' work and there are siren calls for cultural studies to be 'reintegrated' into sociology (see generally, Long, 1997). In one way, I am sympathetic to the spirit of those calls, in so far as I am arguing for a cultural studies whose methods are in broad terms 'sociological', but unsympathetic if that means abandoning cultural studies' distinctive values. In fact, the institutional movement can just as easily be read the other way, with (most) sociology of culture representing now a detailed inflection of cultural studies. There are also significant overlaps between cultural studies and contemporary cultural anthropology, now that the latter has extricated itself from its exclusive concern with mapping 'other' cultures.

Later chapters will reflect these connections. However, I am not interested in disciplinary boundary wars. By 'cultural studies' I mean the discipline (see below) that studies the relations between culture and power, using a method the primary orientation of which is very broadly sociological rather than literary (but allowing for borrowings from literary and anthropological analysis and elsewhere). In terms of detailed methods, there is increasingly an interchange between historic disciplines, making absolute boundaries based on method outdated. What remains distinctive, however, about cultural studies and its institutional history is its concern with culture and power, and the values and commitments which flow from that.

Values and commitments lead on directly to the question of the 'politics' of cultural studies' work. As this is a disputed area, I want to make clear where I stand. From time to time I use the term 'politics' or 'political' in relation to cultural studies, particularly as a contrast to, say, positivist cultural sociology. I explore in detail in Chapter 2 what the distinctive values of cultural studies are. I do not, however, naively believe that academic work in itself has automatic political value: that overestimates the significance of academics by some way. Whether cultural studies' work might, in the long term, have real political effects is difficult to judge, and must involve looking closely at how it is taught and in what institutional settings. I broach these issues in various places but they are slightly to one side of the methodological issues which are the central focus of the book. In terms, then, of the actual political effects of cultural studies, I am prepared to be sceptical and cautious. What I do want to insist upon, however, is that the practice of cultural studies is based on certain values and those values, if consistently and effectively applied in the ways we teach and do research, may have long-term implications for the contexts in which we, our students, and maybe others beyond our institutions think about politics. We should not be afraid of acknowledging that the values of cultural studies are those of cultural and political democracy and the progressive undermining of inequalities of power. It is in this, limited, sense that I refer to the 'politics of cultural studies' and cultural studies' potential to empower.

That is enough explanation of the book's overall outlook, but there are a number of other issues which must be broached at this stage, as context for the debates of later chapters.

### Examining ourselves

My emphasis on reflexivity and the personal perspective may seem unusual when the broader aim is to study culture on a large scale. But the paradox is only apparent. To reflect on the individual experience of culture does not mean turning our backs on the social; instead, thinking about the individual story plunges us immediately into the web of relationships out of which we are formed. As the political philosopher Hannah Arendt put it graphically:

Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it, and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author. (Arendt, 1958: 184)

An emphasis on the individual perspective might, of course, seem narcissistic, and some of the more unkind attacks on recent cultural studies have suggested this (for example, Moran, 1998: 74). But such attacks completely miss the point of how the individual story works. Ien Ang, discussing her relationship to 'Chineseness' as someone of Chinese origin who does not speak Chinese, has expressed such stories' function in terms of 'a reflexive positioning of oneself in history and culture' (Ang, 1994: 4). Thinking about the individual's relation to culture means thinking about the process of individuation (how we each became 'individuals'). This may be a matter of contested and painful history (Probyn, 1993), and it opens directly onto the social and cultural terrain in which individuals are formed.

The individual perspective is also important in cultural studies for another reason. It is central to thinking about how we *communicate* cultural studies as an academic subject: the question of 'pedagogy', or how and what we teach. Pedagogy has been a neglected issue in cultural studies,<sup>8</sup> which is surprising since, arguably, the subject originated from a pedagogic challenge. As Raymond Williams put it in a much-quoted discussion of the demands for new ways of teaching literature and culture in 1930s and 1940s Britain:

in adult education, where people who had been deprived of any continuing educational opportunity were nevertheless readers, and wanted to discuss